

OF SILENCE

T *conticuere om*—so runs a half-finished
sentence which
the spade has brought to light among
the scribblings on
the street-walls of Pompeii. '*Conticuere omnes*
— *\$l* fell
silent'—it is a strangely fitting phrase for
that city of
the dead; as if it had been in some moment
of second-
sight that this Virgilian description of the
hush of the
court of Carthage before Aeneas' story of
the last night
of Troy, was thus scrawled by an idler's
hand on the
walls of the Campanian city—itsself so soon to
pass like-
wise through a fiery darkness into an eternal
silence; as
if, too, in the fearful suddenness with which
fulfilment
followed, time had even been lacking to
complete the
last three letters of this writing on the
wall. I know
no ruins where silence broods with a more
sombre
majesty. It is enough to turn aside from the
main streets,
with their crowds of sight-seers, down some
quiet side-
alley leading to the open countryside, and
there to sit
watching that silvery smoke, pallid as
death, curl on
and on eternally from the grey cone of
Vesuvius above
the cypresses. The silence of the past is there;
the silence
of the present; the silence also of that
future when all
our world will lie at last like one wide
Pompeii. For
there is nothing more ancient than silence,
nothing more
destined to endure. We forget that, since

sound requires
an atmosphere, our noisy little earth is only a
clamorous
islet, a transitory Pithecusa of the Apes, lost
in an infinity
of stillness. Among the short-lived deities of
men Silence
has never had an altar: but she will remain
when other
gods are not even the ghosts of a twilight
memory, and
the last vain cry of their last worshipper has
died away.